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Culture and the Philosophy of Moral Life:

The True, The Good, The Beautiful, and The Sacred

Prefatory Note

Philosophy as a profession is blessed with leisure and exempt from an obligation to be socially useful or productive, and so has a special obligation to address fundamental questions about the meaning of the human project not otherwise on the contemporary agenda. This is not an undertaking that requires technical language or special skills. William James described the deceptively simple task of philosophy as saying something true about things that matter. That said, it is hardly the prerogative of philosophy to adjudicate *which* are matters of crucial importance to a given culture. Moreover, philosophical investigations are of a kind that remain open and without final resolution and there is at the heart of philosophical inquiry a deep conviction that *everything* matters. This suggests that there are important concerns for contemporary philosophy beyond professional disagreements about propositional validity and utility. Among these is the cultural task of providing a framework for accessing and assessing emergent issues that independently make claims upon the mind and spirit of the world's peoples.

In the ordinary affairs of everyday life, philosophers have little to say that is not available equally to any thoughtful and sensible person—no special authority, for example, to make pronouncements on issues of abortion or euthanasia. Inevitable conflicts about such issues may resist definitive solution, and only be properly resolved meaningfully within the life-field of those persons for whom resolution is crucial.

However differently it may be conceived, philosophical inquiry is rightly pitched at a deeper level of consideration than popular counsel on personal action or public policy. But just what is this deeper level and framework of accessibility to things that matter? In an age shorn of absolute values and eternal verities, there still exists a sense of eternal variables—foundational values common to a conception and continuance of the human project that I will try to address in the notes that follow.

I

Four values seem fundamental and invariable in the history and diversity of human cultures: the *True*, the *Good*, the *Beautiful*, and the *Sacred*. Every culture seems to generate definitive activities in response to the foundational questions, as Kant put them: *How do we know? What ought we do? What may we hope?* —questions of knowledge, conduct, and belief. “*What can we make?*” is an additional question that seems commensurate with Kant’s concern, and brings into the aesthetic category of the Beautiful into the mix as an elemental value of human possibility. All these questions center in human agency and so constitute a framework of moral life.

I am aware that the use of upper case reference to these values will not meet with the approval of many contemporary philosophers. I do not mean in referring the Good, or the True, that these name some one thing; the concepts conveniently reference an aspiration to something fundamental and common to human beings of enduring concern. Whatever the skeptical reservations and suspicions of philosophers, within our language and culture we commonly aspire to and commend what is true, good, beautiful, and sacred. Whatever disagreements may arise concerning either the nature or detail of their expression, these four remain fundamental to the conception of the moral

life of human beings. It may be that some of my remarks will seem directed against the current idols of a relativist and skeptical age; my intent is simpler, however, and I will proceed to speak plainly about the obvious importance of these elemental values without further entertaining post-modernist worries about definitive reference.

These are not the only terms in which to describe culture, of course. Neither are they wholly independent questions or pure categories; they do appear to be primary ones. It might be objected that this accounting leaves out the most important value category of all: "the Useful". It is widely presumed that the issues of power and utility set modern culture apart as displacing any earlier values constituting social life and progress. A popular and plausible view of contemporary political and professional life is captured in the declaration that it is of no consequence whether or not something is *true*, only whether it is useful: will it *work*? Power and utility, so understood as reductive categories, however, tend at best to discount or explain away too much that is essential in human history. An understanding of the full moral life of human beings requires a comprehensive account of the activities joined and associated with the questions of what is true, good, beautiful, and sacred—and an understanding of the relationships between them. The activities of inferring and validating, for example, connect to moral action and life conduct; both involve aesthetic experience and imaginative construction, and all such essential value activities engage or fail to engage spiritual faith and religious belief, creating an essential fourfold of cultural life.

The importance of these categories, as canonical for culture, is that they provide a framework and boundaries of what it means to be a human being, a being with speech (*logos*), and hence graced with a faculty of expression in which to create an identity and

history. The identity of a people may be formed in very distinct and contrasting ways: within the tradition of an oral culture stories are told and remembered; a literate tradition produces history and a people of the book; in our time, a burgeoning world culture is levered and leveled by electronic media. In each case an appeal to fundamental values is common, but results in individuated expressions within a totality of activities that define a particular culture.

II

Perhaps the most important thing to say about the value of truth, given its modern dominance in Western culture and in reference to the presumed rivalry between the truth claims of science with respect to any other discipline or discourse, is that there is no one authority on the distributive boundaries for this value. Rather, there are multiple perspectives that serve different cultural needs and so, too, different ways of adjudicating the judgment “true”. A common practice since Francis Bacon is to insist that the value of knowledge is not that it yields truth, but that it generates power. If there are empirical truths in science, they are the repeatable truths of public consensus, provisional on further research and experiment: “true” is broadly defined in this context as “probable.” In formal disciplines such as logic and mathematics, “true” is contextually defined in terms of the consistency of self-identity and non-contradiction: that is true, the denial of which is self-contradictory.

Truth is differently conceived in the discipline of history; no factual claim can be true concerning history in the sense of testable or repeatable. However, a common characteristic of scientific theories, historical treatises, and religious doctrines is that all are ways of telling a story, the truth of which is determined within the scope and

commitments of a given practice. One relies on *theories* in science, *accounts* in history, *beliefs* in religion to make sense of the world, of tradition, of one's life. Truth, generally, is a function of that trust and reliance.

It is perhaps a mistake to identity the True even as the domain of *knowledge*. In religion, for example, truth is not primarily the truth of knowledge, but of faith: to be *in the truth*, in spiritual terms, is more a testimony of commitment than a claim of knowledge. In terms of Kant's question, "What may we hope?" hope is understood in terms of the truth of belief, or rather of a faith which teaches hope. Knowledge has many forms, as well as resources. Compare for a moment the complexity of marking the differences in the idea of knowledge between "I know $12^3 = 1728$," "I know Socrates was executed in 399 B.C.," "I know Latin," "I know that taking a life is wrong," "I know today is Tuesday," "I know my Redeemer liveth." We clearly do make distinctions, and can give an account of such differences—in terms of knowledge and belief, between knowing that and knowing how, for example—but only in a context of engagement on different levels of commitment that require different kinds of reasons.

The essential question is whether the issue of truth and the cultural value of the True have a claim to priority; whether they carry an imperative somehow exclusive and decidable before all other values. A short answer that is also a corrective to the presumptive epistemology since Descartes—even where the context of inquiry is clearly one of seeking knowledge—is that the *sense* of a question is prior to any consideration of its *truth*. The determination of sense, in turn, depends on an understanding and reference to other primary values—moral, religious, aesthetic. One may insist on a connection between knowledge and understanding, for example, but there are also occasions for

marking an essential difference between the two: one may have knowledge without understanding, and also come to an understanding in the absence of the possession of knowledge. It is possible to express or ascertain the presence of understanding, and yet be incapable of providing an explanation which knowledge requires. The familiar locution, "I can't define it, but I know it when I see it," was cited by a U.S. Supreme Court Judge in the troublesome case of trying to set rules for the adjudication of obscenity and pornography. Whether or not this observation is appropriate for a Supreme Court Judge, it is a common fact and form of language use. Many can and do correctly use the subjunctive without the capacity to articulate the rule of that use. Nor is the mutual understanding of those in love contingent upon a *verification* of trust.

It is possible to analyze variable, but characteristic clusters of the True, where the concerns are, for example, with what is certain, or rational, or necessary, or absolute, or universal, or reasonable, or predictable, or fulfilling. Each of these concerns may suggest areas of cultural interest or activity, but all connect in different ways and contexts with the values fundamental to cultural life.

III

What ought we do? As Kant's question indicates, the Good is primarily related to doing and being, rather than thinking. But, as with the other fundamental values, this concept and category has no exact boundaries and will interface and overlap others that together constitute the cultural realm and moral life of human beings. Rather than attempt what is not possible—to give the essence of what goodness, or truth, or beauty is—philosophical analysis is limited to contrasting concepts that are otherwise integrative experiences. The idea of inquiry is to indicate a nucleus of meaning that in turn will

illuminate different important aspects of our collective cultural life and history. Perhaps no one would expect that the Good would have more definite boundaries than the True, but it is important to note on this level that the concepts marks a distinction, they do not name an essence. There are true answers, and good answers—which may or may not be the same. Both true and good apply in their own ways to many different things: propositions, friends, examples, directions, perspectives, angles, character... and in each case the sense of the concept changes from its earlier employment, independently, even, of further context.

It is a first but not a final thing, to notice simple paradigms of opposition: true/false, good/evil, sacred/profane. Such paradigms usefully demonstrate that a logic of meaning requires contrast as well as reference: "Is this a good act?" Without knowing anything more, it is appropriate to remark that an answer to this question depends on the sense of its asking as well as the context and nature of the act itself: "Good as opposed to *what*? Evil? Average? Useless? Stupid? Vulgar? Thoughtless? Or in further contrast, do you mean is it *only* good, not excellent? Merely common, not exceptional? Within the usual paradigm of modern philosophy, questions of knowledge and conduct are often divided; partitioned into the areas of epistemology on the one hand, and ethics on the other. Thus it becomes the assigned task of ethics to make distinctions between worth and value, character and reputation, action and behavior, always to the end of a clarifying or confirming obligation.

In line with our earlier citation about what matters, William James counsels elsewhere that philosophy must learn to use the broad resources of literature and the arts, rather than limit itself to logic and inference. It is a major step toward this goal to

consider the basic unit of ethics to be moral *life*, not moral action, or moral rule, much less moral theory. The Good, like the True, the Beautiful, and the Sacred, pervades the cultural life of human beings, and a philosophy that is not responsible to this fact cannot hope to contribute to the betterment of the human condition.

IV

Beauty, as a fundamental category of culture, is a key to the creative source and appeal of imagination. Human beings first delight in the immediacy of sensuous apprehension—*aesthesis*—and, when sensual immediacy is sustained, the mimetic activity of art arises. Aristotle marks productive imagination as one of three characteristic forms of human intelligence: *poiesis*, making things, shaping the world of sight, sound, and motion into new ways of experience. In this sense, art is the most basic of all human cultural activities—a process of interaction with the natural environment that transforms nature into world.

The ancient drawings on the cave walls of Lascaux remain a fascination for us that completes a circle of wonder, somehow connected to a primal passion for self-understanding. There is no real way out of this circle--wondering about wondering--and so the circle itself becomes magic, a source of continuing and creative wonder. It is as if something in us responds to the miracle of life; we strive to create things, are struck by the beauty of our creations, and hope those creations will somehow speak to us of who and what we are. The answer is found only in the activity, however: we are creatures who wonder, who find beauty in the world, and who rejoice in the things we make.

What are we about, then in the dark caves of Lascaux, and now in the creative continuance of art in our lives—that we are driven to picture to ourselves what is not

present? An obvious answer is: to bring to presence what is not there, or alternatively to make more fully alive what is present. The empowerment of representation is a common choice to explain the activity that produced the ancient Lascaux Bison, as if the picturing commanded the presencing of food, much as dancing is to induce rain. This may be part of an explanation, but surely not the whole of it. There is an elemental delight in the picturing and the picture itself—just again, as with the ecstasy of movement in the dance—that needs to be included in any account. Gombrich famously uses the example of the "Dada"—the hobbyhorse of the child at play—to begin an account of art and imagination, in which a stick and piece of string become the powerful surging flanks of a great horse beneath the child. This is a suggestion not a conclusion for Gombrich, but the analogy may help to make plain sense of the compelling poetic urge of human beings to create. Bringing something to life, to presence through imagination, requires both immediacy of sense, and reflection in the creative impulse, which in turn provides us with a sense of beauty that makes of our lives a better, truer, and more sacred journey.

As a celebration of wonder, of taking delight in oneself and the appeal of the other, beauty may on occasion reach a depth of awe, a sense of the sublime that we associate with great art. Or, it may simply correlate with dramatic turns in our own sense of the world: the beauty of a fine summer day, or of a mountain rainbow in the morning mist, may stay in memory for a lifetime. From one point of view, beauty appeals on its own terms—it has no need to be useful or concerned with possession of truth or the exercise of power. It remains an open question whether beauty is a simple matter of recognition or a result of active creation; a resonance of self and other, or a provocation that generates art. Both require imagination, and are finally not separable: "seeing" is

always in some sense "seeing as..." recognition an act of creation. It becomes clear through analysis is that beauty is a complex phenomenon, or a complex of phenomena, but in every instance it bears the signature of human culture.

In our time, regrettably, beauty has often been degraded to surface cosmetics. Perhaps the casual reduction of beauty to the incidental is not so different from that of contemporary morality, which is widely regarded as an arbitrary listing of social interdictions. The variable range of objectionable behavior ranges from manners to mayhem, but a relativist mentality draws no clear and absolute limits. Each new generation of 'moderns' seems suspicious of moral values it regards as superimposed by an older generation no longer in touch with the vitality of their own lives. We may still picture 'natural beauty' in terms of health and youth, but even this seems commercially appropriated by an industry in which appearance is everything—the occasion for health cults and an unnatural obsession with remaining young. Presumably, if one has the appearance of youth, this mirroring façade alone will sustain her spirit. At best this seems the wrong way about. In the temper of our time, the ethical and the aesthetic stand at risk in becoming negative value indices of contemporary culture.

The philosophical challenge, leaving aside the vulgarities of popular culture, is to rediscover the positive features and functions of the Good and the Beautiful, toward a revitalization of a higher culture, one more creative and preserving of values necessary to a fully human community. Perhaps all our most fundamental and sustaining values including the true and the sacred have suffered irremediable devaluation in the contemporary world. It is widely believed, indeed presumed, that science has replaced religion as a source of knowledge; and if knowledge becomes the single adjudication of

value, then it may be imagined, if not hoped, that science will equally displace the spiritual resource of religious faith, as well as the moral authority of tradition. When so enforced, utilitarian abuse leads to cultural poverty.

V

As a corrective to the idols of our time, a useful resource for an analysis of the general relation of foundational values is the *Symposium* of Plato. In this dialogue, recall, Plato examines the dialectical development of desire, in which the four values of interest to us here—the True, the Good, the Beautiful, and the Sacred are brought together in a synthetic union and transcendence of desire in the person of Socrates. Beauty, for example, functions both as the immediate occasion and object of desire (where *eros* means lack, or need) and becomes, through dialectical development, the *telic* form or *eidos* which frames the most comprehensive form of all: the *eidos* of the Good. The Socratic form of this outline is roughly as follows: desire for the possession of *beauty* generates a search for *knowledge* of the *good*, which is the *sacred* task, given by the god.

The cultural question that identifies the Sacred as fundamental is Kant's question "What may we hope?" This domain of cultural life centers in the existential mode of possibility, not proof. Neither factual considerations nor discursive argument settle questions of spiritual conflict or disagreement when they arise. Discord unfortunately has become the rule in and among competing religions where the sacred is less a source of aspiration and devotion, than an article of authority and command. In its most positive creative expression, however, the spiritual is a mode of experience that integrates the individual's sense of herself with the whole of existence, not one that eristically divides human beings from each other. Although the sacred is usually distinguished from the

secular, of primary importance in a description of the sacred is that it defines two kinds of unique experience. In addition to an acute and general sense of the wholly Other before which one stands in awe, it is characteristic of the sacred that it generates a sense of being complete and at one with the whole of existence. Both are elemental and transcendental modes of human experience. The very idea of culture begins with the cult, a form of association that grounds itself in terms of the sacred. Rituals develop within the cult that bond and solidify relational identity. In this way the cult of the religious is a model for relational orders within other foundational structures, whether of courtesy or civility, whether communities of research or traditions of art. Finally, the sacred is an elemental response to the simple fact that life itself is a gift. Whether that realization inspires wonder or fear, human sensibility returns again and again to the fragile contingencies of existence.

VI

So far, we have engaged in a general analysis of four primary cultural categories: that is, we have distinguished each from the others in the experience and activities of cultural life and achievement. In reality they are not so separated. As analytic categories, true/ good/ beautiful/ sacred are made distinct so that we can better understand and articulate the correlative logic of their connection. That is how the logic of explanation works in pursuit of knowledge. In cultural life, however, there is invariably an integration of that which we conceptually separate. For example, the tradition of philosophy sets out the logic of “the true” within the domain of *episteme* “theoretical” knowledge. The true, as far as it is a concern of science, is to distinguish and connect the things of the world as a system of relationships: to see the world as if we were independent of it, or, more to the

point, as if it were independent of our intentions and descriptions—to see the world as an independent collection of interrelated things. Most simply, such a view of “the true” understands the task of all significant inquiry to be to explain the world as a logical network of causal relations.

But this is a limited view of both knowledge and truth. The True, as a fundamental value in culture, also figures essentially in the language and discourse of each of the other three categories—indeed, each figures in the discourse of all the others. In ethics, for example, the True is considered in terms of *ethos*, where “true” defines character, as in true to oneself, true to others, and true to one’s principles and responsibilities. So too, there is truth in art: the True as *aesthesis*, the truth of sensuous apprehension and expression, in which a work is judged “true to life”: *vraisemblance*. Great works of art become so in their capacity to disclose truth (*aletheia*) as a coming into presence of the real.

Finally, in the context and language of the Sacred, there is the True in *spiritual* terms, referring here not to the theology of pronouncement in which various institutional religions lay claim to unique authority. Christian scripture, not its theology, is exemplary of the point in which the sacred is a source of spiritual freedom and rebirth: The “*Vida, Veritas, Vita*,” (“...the way, the truth, the life...”) expresses an existential *possibility* in which a form of life can be appropriated and renewed. Such possibility is the hallmark of sacred scripture in the world’s great religions.

The point of this synthesis is merely to outline the obvious: the fundamental values of the True, the Good, the Beautiful, and the Sacred are essential resources for the fullness of human life and moral community. It only remains to bear witness in our collective

experience and activity to the truth that everything matters, and that everything of consequence to human existence that merits our deep concern can only find full expression and continuance in the vital resources of this cultural heritage.

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